Bruce M. Moseley and Helen S. Schwartz

Developing the Interpretive Plan for Oneida Community Mansion House

Oneida Community Mansion House (OCMH), a nonprofit museum, begins the 21st century dedicated to preserving and interpreting the Mansion House, a 93,000-square-foot National Historic Landmark. The building is a wonderful artifact of the 19th century. Some of the ideas espoused by the Oneida Community are still relevant and some are still considered radical after over 150 years since its founding. The new interpretive plan seeks to ensure a future in which the Mansion House and its exhibits and programs become increasingly accessible to a larger public audience.

The Mansion House, constructed in stages between 1861 and 1914, was the home of the 19th-century religious utopian Oneida Community which was founded in 1848 by John Humphrey Noyes and his followers when they moved to Oneida, New York, from Putney, Vermont. They called themselves Perfectionists and lived communally until 1880, when the utopian community became the joint-stock company, Oneida Community Ltd. Now called Oneida Ltd., the company is a leading tableware manufacturer.

The Mansion House and south lawn, c. 1875. The south wing (1869) is in the foreground and the porch of the 1862 building is on the right.

The three-story brick structure is owned and operated as a museum by Oneida Community Mansion House, a nonprofit corporation formed in 1987, and chartered by the Board of Regents of the University of the State of New York. The Mansion House Service Corporation, a wholly-owned subsidiary, manages 35 apartments, 9 guestrooms, and the dining room. The grounds comprise about 33 1/2 acres, including the lawns and gardens immediately surrounding the building, and nearby parkland.

Lasting from 1848 to 1880, the Oneida Community was one of the most successful and long-lived of the 19th-century utopian communities. It was based near the Erie Canal in Central New York in the middle of the "Burned-Over District," an area where religious revivals and utopian communities of the Second Great Awakening flourished to an unusual degree. John Humphrey Noyes, the community's leader throughout its life, had a conversion experience at a religious revival in 1831, which made him dedicate his life to the ministry. He left the conventional Protestant church in 1834, however, when he proclaimed himself free of sin through his faith in Christ. Others also shared his belief in the possibility of personal and societal perfection, but the radical nature of his particular interpretation led to his expulsion from Yale Theological Seminary and the loss of his license as a minister. He believed others could share his self-professed perfection and set out to teach them how.

Noyes, born in Brattleboro, Vermont, made his first attempts at establishing a community in the nearby town of Putney. It was based on what he called "Bible communism," the belief that all should live sharing their possessions and work in common like early Christians. Forced to leave Vermont by the surrounding residents' disapproval, Noyes and his followers went to Oneida, New York, where some perfectionist converts already lived. There, in 1848, Noyes and his community were able to purchase cheaply a large

tract of land. This would be the home of the Oneida Community until its dissolution in 1881.

Perfectionism, bible communism, and complex marriage were the ideological foundations of the Oneida Community. Following Noyes, the Community members believed perfection was possible in this world through dedicating their lives to Christ and his teachings, in this case as interpreted by John Humphrey Noyes. Bible communism led them to live together in what they would call the Mansion House, a complex of connected buildings that underwent construction and modification throughout the community's life. At the height of the community, over 300 people lived there, sharing material resources and necessary labor. There were smaller branch communities in Brooklyn, New York; Newark, New Jersey; and Wallingford, Connecticut.

Complex marriage was the most controversial of the community's beliefs, and the one that most strongly precipitated their retreat from Vermont. Noyes believed that conventional monogamy fostered possessiveness and that women were oppressed by the inability to control the timing of childbearing. Complex marriage connected the community's members in a system which allowed and encouraged them to form sexual relationships with any other adult member of the opposite sex. The community disdained exclusive attachments which might mimic monogamy. Men were in charge of birth control, practicing "male continence," which prohibited ejaculation.

During the life of the Oneida Community, industrialization began to edge out agriculture as the base of the American economy. The community's search for economic stability was similarly affected. They began by selling canned fruits and vegetables, but by the time the community dissolved, their prosperity relied on factories producing animal traps, silk thread, and silverware. In 1879, the Oneida Community abandoned complex marriage; on January 1, 1881, it became a joint-stock company, Oneida Community Ltd. Now called Oneida Ltd., it is still a major producer of tableware.

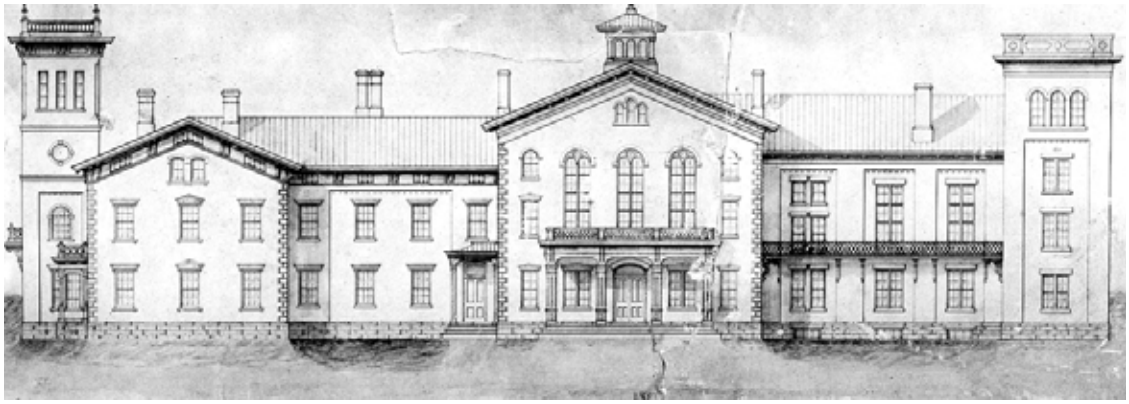
The original Mansion House was a frame structure built in 1848 when the community consisted of about 50 members. By 1860, the community had outgrown this building and Erastus Hamilton, a community member and an architect, designed a new building in the Italian villa style. The community built the present Mansion House in stages between 1861 and 1914. Hamilton and successive planners constructed the building to fit the needs of the community and to encourage the communal aspects of daily life. At the center of the building was a large meeting hall with a stage suitable for evening meetings, plays, and concerts. Around a central core of rooms open to the public were family sitting rooms and individual or double sleeping rooms.

In 1863, the Tontine, then a separate building, went up. It contained work space for various enterprises. The community added the South Wing, also known as the Children's Wing, to the main building in 1869 to hold the nursery and rooms for the children and their education and entertainment. The final addition before the end of the community period was the New House Wing (1877), which accommodated a large influx of members when the community closed the Wallingford branch and brought those members to Oneida. The Mansion House complex, as it appears today, was completed in 1914, with the construction of the Lounge, built to connect the Tontine to the main building.

After 1880, the Mansion House and Kenwood (as the surrounding neighborhood came to be called) remained the center of the community of descendants who were also the managers of the company. The building was a residence and social center reserved for community descendants and guests of Oneida Community Ltd. In 1988, the Mansion House became a public institution when Oneida Ltd. donated the building to Oneida Community Mansion House.

Since the days of the Oneida Community, visitors have toured the Mansion House. During the life of the community, Noyes was intent on spreading the word of his philosophies and how they were enacted at Oneida. The community published several journals for a national audience and welcomed visitors to the Mansion House from throughout the world. Socialists, social thinkers, celebrities, and the interested public flocked to Oneida and toured the public areas of the Mansion House.

In the early 20th century, Oneida was the object of interest to writers and scholars, such as H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, Julian Huxley, and George Bernard Shaw. Shaw included the essay



Elevation of the Mansion House, east façade. Watercolor and pencil on paper, Erastus H. Hamilton, 1821-1894.

"Experiment at Oneida Creek" in *The Revolutionist's Handbook* which was appended to his play, *Man and Superman*.

The Mansion House is still an important destination for both scholars and a general audience. Visitors come to Oneida because of a genuine interest in the story of the Oneida Community and because the issues addressed within the community still resonate for modern Americans. The extraordinary evolution of the Oneida Community from a religious experiment to a prospering industrial corporation both highlights and mirrors trends in American society as a whole.

The Mansion House is open to the public for guided tours on a regular basis, but current offerings are limited. Nine times a week at scheduled times, volunteer guides lead visitors on tours of selected spaces (the Big Hall, the Upper Sitting Room, the nursery kitchen, and a representative sleeping room) within the Mansion House. Also part of the tour is a small exhibit of Oneida Community artifacts and the exhibit, *The Braidings of Jessie Catherine Kinsley*, which presents the unique early-20th-century textile art made by a former member of the Oneida Community. Many of the volunteer guides are descendants of the Oneida Community and some live in the house. The tour varies according to the individual guide, but usually lasts about an hour. The typical tour is based on an outline developed over the past 10 years and consists of background and a chronological narrative, into which are interwoven the themes and ideas that were central to the community.

Realizing the need to expand the audience and adapt interpretive techniques, Oneida Community Mansion House developed a comprehensive Interpretive Plan. It was developed over a 10-month period beginning in December 1999, and culminating with its approval by the Board of Trustees in September 2000. The plan addresses the issues of the relevance of the Oneida Community story to a modern audience and finds ways to tell that story in an interesting and accessible way.

The three-phase process began with a consultation grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, which funded a colloquium of scholars, museum professionals, and descendants that took place in December 1999. The colloquium established the themes and content of site interpretation and provided the intellectual basis for the interpretive plan. The colloquium participants considered how the history of the Oneida Community and of Oneida Community Ltd. relates to the larger American historical experience, which themes and issues can be used to unify site interpretation, how these themes and issues can be integrated into the site interpretation, and how to attract a wider audience.

A grant from the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) funded a planning conference in April 2000. At this meeting, a group of outside museum professionals and Mansion House staff developed the results of the December colloquium into practical program ideas for the Mansion House.

In the final phase, consultant Helen Schwartz and Mansion House staff drafted the plan document, drawing on the results of Phases I and II and on travel to selected communal sites. The plan was approved by the OCMH Board of Trustees in September 2000.

The Mansion House Interpretive Plan draws on the memories of living descendants and on current academic study of utopian societies. It

uses the best practices found in the museum and preservation fields to expand the current offerings of exhibits, tours, and programs. The plan

- defines the institutional philosophy of interpretation;
- determines the content of the interpretation;
- begins to identify the audiences;
- considers various interpretive approaches and techniques;
- begins to evaluate changes needed in the facilities to enhance accessibility for all, regardless of disability.

According to the Interpretive Plan, the central message is that "The Oneida Community was created as an intentional, alternative society designed to achieve perfection in men and women's relationship with God, with one another, to work, and to the community." This message breaks down into five central themes: religion (perfectionism), family, community, work, and change over time.

The plan defines the Main Tour and lays out specialized Focus Tours. The Main Tour will be structured to allow contemporary visitors to re-enact the experience of 19th-century visitors to the Oneida Community, and will take no longer than an hour. Rooms will be furnished with reproductions. Focus Tours will give visitors a behind-the-scenes look into the private and work life of the community. Possible topics are

- Architecture and Technology—including the basements and the Tontine;
- Work—including the chain room in the basement and the Tontine;
- Child rearing—including the expanded nursery area;
- Housework—including the recreated laundry and kitchen areas;
- Gardens and Grounds—self-guided with maps and signs; and
- Daily Life of the Community.

Special exhibits will allow changing and expanded programming.

One of the primary objectives of the Interpretive Plan is the expansion of the Mansion House audience through improved and accessible programming. About 14,000 people visit the Mansion House each year. Of those, the audience for Mansion House museum programs is relatively small, averaging about 4,000 visitors per year. This includes the regularly-scheduled guided tours, special group tours, offsite school programs, and special events, such as concerts and lectures. In addition, the Mansion House hosts special events, such as weddings and banquets, and has nine guest rooms that are open to the public. About 10,000 customers are served at about 130 special events per year and about 1,100 people per year stay in the nine guestrooms.

Central to the success of the Interpretive Plan is the zoning of the building into public and private space. For over 100 years, the Mansion House was private and, therefore, off limits to the local populace. The building has been public since 1988, and OCMH's challenge has been opening up the building and its programs to the local community as well as to descendants and scholars. OCMH needs to make the public feel welcome and define the flow of traffic for the museum and other public activities, while preserving the privacy of the residents who make this a "lived-in museum."

With the new millennium, the Mansion House has entered a new era. For 32 years, the building was the focal point of a radical, social experiment that declared itself a "patent model" for the world. After that, from 1881 until 1988, the building was both the showplace for a successful modern corporation and the ancestral home for Oneida Community descendants. In 1988, OCMH and the Mansion House began the transition from private enclave to public educational institution with private components. The Interpretive Plan marks a major step in that transition and its adoption by the board of trustees affirms the primary role of the building and the organization as public trusts. While perhaps not a radical experiment, the arrangement is certainly outside the norm for house museums in the United States. Embracing the Oneida Community's commitment to both the best ideas and the most efficient means, the tradition of residency allows OCMH to preserve and interpret the building and its history by using it.

Bruce M. Moseley is Executive Director, Oneida Community Mansion House, Oneida, New York .

Helen S. Schwartz is a historical consultant based in Utica, New York.

Illustrations courtesy Oneida Community Mansion House.